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WHY THE FL DROPOUTS.

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A "COURSE DROPOUT" IS A STUDENT WHO DROPS HIS STUDY OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AFTER 2 YEARS IN HIGH SCHOOL. HE FULFILLS HIS MINIMUM FOREIGN LANGUAGE REQUIREMENT FOR COLLEGE ENTRANCE, BUT DOES NOT HAVE A SUFFICIENT MASTERY TO BE EFFECTIVE IN THE LANGUAGE ARTS. THE TREMENDOUS ATTRITION RATE AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS HAS MANY CAUSES--INCONSISTENT TEACHING METHODS, POORLY TRAINED OR UNENTHUSIASTIC TEACHERS WHO DO NOT ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO ENROLL IN ELECTIVE ADVANCED CLASSES, BAD CLASS PROGRAMING, AND UNWISE COUNSELING ARE ONLY A FEW. PERHAPS THE CHIEF CAUSE IS THE FALSE ASSUMPTION THAT PROFICIENCY CAN BE ACHIEVED IN 2 YEARS OF HIGH SCHOOL, ALTHOUGH IT IS KNOWN THAT FLUENCY INCREASES ONLY WITH CONTINUED LANGUAGE STUDY AND PRACTICE. CERTAIN MEASURES ARE NEEDED TO CURTAIL THE ATTRITION RATE AND TO ENCOURAGE COURSES OF LANGUAGE STUDY THAT BEGIN IN THE SIXTH GRADE AND CONTINUE THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL. THIS ARTICLE IS PUBLISHED IN "FOREIGN LANGUAGE NEWSLETTER," VOLUME 14, NUMBER 57, MAY 1966. (AS)

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Why The FL Dropouts?

by *John P. Dusel*

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Students who leave high school before graduation have received the attention of the whole nation because these dropouts represent a waste of America's reservoir of educated youth. Even if they obtain employment and transform themselves into "instant taxpayers," they sometimes cheat themselves and the nation financially and educationally. The dropouts do this by failing to develop their potential abilities.

Now, let us consider two kinds of dropouts who actually graduate. These are the dropouts who do not make the headlines even though their numbers are larger than the total of those who leave school: the psychological dropout and the course dropout. They are especially evident among foreign language students.

The insidious situation of the foreign language dropout originates with the student who becomes frustrated through lack of success in course work or who finds that the subject matter is not geared to his interest or ability. He "tunes out" his attention and effort while sitting in the classroom and in a short time becomes a psychological dropout. He may manage in some way to remain in the course and receive a borderline passing grade, but he will not learn to use the language effectively.

He may try to convince his parents, teacher, and counselor that he should drop the course. If he is successful in his efforts to drop, he becomes a course dropout (CDO). The CDO may not have been challenged, or he may have been lazy, or the class may have been too large to allow the teacher to give him individual attention.

A second type of CDO drops his study of a foreign language after two years. He represents a less obvious waste in our educational system than does the first type since he remains long enough to fulfill minimum foreign language requirements for college entrance. But his efforts are largely wasted because he does not reach a sufficient level of mastery to be effective in either speaking, reading, or writing the language.

For various reasons most foreign language students in secondary schools terminate their study after two years, substituting a different subject during the eleventh and twelfth grades.

In Connecticut, for example, there were in 1954 in the public high schools 4300 students in first year French, 2800 in second year French, 700 in third year, and 160 in fourth year. Thus a third of those who enrolled studied the language for one year and then dropped it.[1] In California schools about seventy percent end their enrollment in a foreign language within two years. Ninety percent of the foreign language students who begin their study in the ninth grade drop out by the twelfth grade.

DROP IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ENROLLMENTS IN CALIFORNIA SECONDARY SCHOOLS GRADES 9 TO 12

Percent of students who have dropped study of a FL after two years or less

French	77%
German	56%
Spanish	71%
Totals in 9 languages[2]	70%

Percent of students who have dropped study of a FL after three years

French	93%
German	85%
Spanish	90%
Totals in 9 languages[2]	90%

The tremendous attrition has many causes:

1. Teaching methods. Methods which are not consistent with the desired outcomes cause bewilderment. The learner may discover that the teaching methods and general content of the foreign language sequence have changed between his second and third year of study. If a change from an audio-lingual to a "deciphering-literature" approach occurs, the student may feel that his preparation was inadequate.

2. Teacher qualities. Well trained and enthusiastic teachers who project their interest and vitality in foreign language instruction seem to retain a greater number of students over the high school years than do the other teachers. Since third and fourth year foreign language courses are elective, a student may decide to discontinue the subject because the only available instructor has an unpleasant personality. After young people have been studying a language for several years, the teacher's language ability or lack of it is apparent to them. Students generally will not enroll in an advanced class taught by a teacher limited in his language abilities.

3. Programming. Those administrators in charge of class programming may find it difficult or impossible to schedule third year French at a time different from advanced classes in mathematics, shorthand, orchestra, commercial art, journalism, or sheet metal. Students must then make a choice and drop one of the two courses which they had planned to take. In addition, administrators must decide if a class in third year German should be offered if only eleven people enroll. Some districts, offering a third year of Russian in one school, transport students from other schools in the district to build up the size of the class. Those who might enroll for a third year may decide that the time wasted in travel and the effort involved are not worth the trouble.

4. Unwise counseling. A foreign language student may be encouraged to become a CDO by teachers and counselors who mistakenly give the impression that two years of a foreign language are enough for the college-bound. The National Association of Secondary-School Principals recommends that a minimum of four years' sequential study be available to students who can profit from it.[3]

Two years of a foreign language in the ninth and tenth grades are almost a total waste of time because those who drop language study after the tenth grade will then have the two remaining years in high school without practice. By graduation time they will have forgotten much of what they had learned. When regular language study and practice cease, fluency decreases rapidly.

Most public statements about the values of language learning, whether made by language teachers or by other persons, stress values that are achieved only with mastery of a foreign language or very considerable proficiency in speaking and reading it. No harm is done by such statements unless they imply or assume—as too often they do—that mastery or real proficiency can be achieved in two years of high school or one year of college education.

In the educational system of *no other nation on earth* is such an assumption made. It is not made because it is irresponsible. It is made in the United States only because language instruction here, unlike language instruction elsewhere, is frequently limited to two years of high school or one year of college instruction. The inevitable result has been disillusion

for both pupils and public. With more and more people now advocating foreign language study in the national interest, both the public and educational administrators need to realize the amount of curricular time necessary for the acquisition of real proficiency in a second language.[4]

Two years of a foreign language is a minimum requirement of the University of California, but the following departments suggest that a student should study for a longer time: Chemistry, Fine Arts, Letters and Science, Arts and Humanities, Classical and Modern Languages, Physical Education, Physical Sciences and Mathematics, Social Sciences and Related Fields, Business Administration, Criminology, Dentistry, Librarianship and Library Service, Medicine, Nursing, Optometry, Pharmacy, and Public Health.[5] All of these departments recommend more than two years and phrase their recommendation in the following ways: Three or four years of German; four years of one high school foreign language; the attainment of a certain degree of proficiency in the use of . . . at least one foreign language; as many courses in one foreign language as are available; by completing three or four years of one high school foreign language; at least three years of one foreign language, preferably French, German, or Russian.

In one of the largest state colleges in California fourteen semester units of foreign language are required for the major in chemistry, English, history, music, and political science; the mathematics department requires eight units of foreign language. Department faculty members determine informally the competence of the entering students and place them accordingly.

5. Change in student plans. The success or failure which young people constantly encounter in their school work stimulates new plans, and these in turn result in program changes. By the junior or senior year a student may decide that he is no longer interested in going to college. He may find other subjects more of an immediate necessity.

6. Transferring from one school to another. Probably little can be done for a young person who transfers from one school to another and finds that the language which he had been studying is not offered.

From the point of view of curriculum, the succession of learnings offered to a student is not well planned. All too frequently the proposed learnings display little discernible continuity as the student passes from one institution to another or from one level to another. In his second or third year, he is likely to find himself either floundering beyond his depth or treading the same old mill, if indeed he is not completely disoriented because neither the learnings nor the conditions bear any resemblance to what he has experienced before.[6]

What are some preventive measures to curtail the number of CDOs? Communication and understanding of methods and materials between the elementary and high school teachers of Spanish, for example, will do much to minimize foreign language dropout. A grade of A in first level Spanish taken in the elementary grades should represent the same excellence as a grade of A given in a first level Spanish course taken in high school. A meaningful relationship between each level of language study must be evident. Lack of state-wide agreement among schools in the meaning of levels of foreign language achievement will be largely ameliorated if teachers and administrators will follow the outlines established in such California State guides as *French: Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing,* and *Spanish: Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing.*[7] A teacher's guide in German is now being prepared. A description of competence by levels in all foreign languages may be found in another bulletin from the State Department of Education, *Language Instruction—Perspective and Prospectus.*[8]

Educators now are asking questions about the future developments in foreign language. What will be the future trend in foreign language enrollment? Will students who have begun a foreign language in the sixth grade continue their foreign language study into advanced levels? Will the use of the audiolingual approach rather than an analytical approach help retain students in the foreign language program? Or will California's mandated foreign language instruction result in the greatest number of dropouts occurring between the eighth and ninth grades?

The answers to these questions will be known within a few years, but perhaps some predictions can be made. If we teach *a* foreign language and not *about* a foreign language, enrollment will remain high. If counselors, teachers, and parents encourage continuance of language study until fluency is achieved, enrollment will remain high. If a course in Italian II in one school is comparable in content to an Italian II course in other schools, those who transfer will probably continue their study of Italian, and enrollment will remain high. If high school programs are made flexible, permitting easier registration into advanced courses, enrollment in foreign language will remain high. If all foreign language classes are not geared for the college preparatory student alone, enrollment will remain high. If teachers of foreign language can agree statewide what should be taught in levels I, II, III, IV, and V, enrollment will remain high. If an audiolingual approach is used in the mandatory program and continued in the succeeding year, enrollment will remain high.

On the other hand, if children are not permitted to study the language of their choice in the sixth grade, a noticeable dropout may occur in the ninth grade when they are permitted to make a choice.

The place of the modern foreign language program in the schools will, no doubt, undergo great changes in years ahead. Since nearly all pupils can learn to speak and understand a foreign language, provided the learning experience is an early one, making such an experience available is clearly a problem for administration and the board of education.[9]

Certainly the intent of the foreign language law is to encourage school districts to offer foreign languages. The California State Board of Education has by resolution attempted to call this fact to the attention of California administrators and boards of education.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the State Board of Education encourage school districts to consider teaching a variety of languages, that adequate attention be given to effective teaching, that continuous sequence of language instruction from the elementary through the secondary grades be offered, and that proper articulation between the elementary and secondary grades be maintained.[10]

Plugging some of the holes in a sieve slows but does not stop that which drops out. Those educators who seek to decrease the dropout rate among students of foreign language must deal with the several causes of the attrition. To encourage students to continue foreign language study, for example, without making sure that class size is optimum, may not alleviate the dropout problem.

Perhaps the most effective and practical solution is to change our concept that foreign language learning serves only to identify the college bound. Foreign language in past years was taught to students as though they all were planning to become language teachers.

The many causes of foreign language dropout must be dealt with simultaneously. Administrators and teachers should be

sure that the classroom atmosphere is pleasant and conducive to learning. Teachers must agree among themselves upon instructional materials psychologically designed and sequentially built. The method used in the teaching of foreign languages must be planned so that the student who advances from grade to grade and from elementary school to high school and perhaps to college will be aware of a singleness of purpose among foreign language teachers.

If a continuous sequence of a variety of languages is offered from the elementary through the secondary grades, perhaps the frequently heard comment—"I studied French for two years in high school, but all I can remember is bonjour"—might instead be this in the future—"I studied French from the sixth through the twelfth grades, and, you know, I am able to discuss quite a few things with those people from France who just moved in across the street."

FOOTNOTES

[1]Nelson Brooks, *Languages and Language Learning* (New York, 1960), p. 67.

[2]Chinese, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Latin, and Russian are included. Information obtained from the 1963 October Report, California State Department of Education.

[3]Ho Remer, *A Handbook for Guiding Students in Modern Foreign Languages*, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (Washington, 1963), p. 10.

[4]Wilmarth H. Starr, Mary P. Thompson, and Donald D. Walsh, *Modern Foreign Languages and the Academically Talented Student*, National Education Association of the United States, 1960), p. 29.

[5]*Prerequisites and Recommended Subjects*, In preparation for Work to be Undertaken at the University of California Berkeley, University of California, 1961.

[6]Brooks, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

[7]California State Department of Education, French 1962, Spanish 1961.

[8]Nelson Brooks, Charles Hockett, and Everett O'Rourke, Bulletin of the California State Department of Education, Vol. XXXII, No. 4, 1963.

[9]Wilmarth H. Starr, Mary P. Thompson, and Donald D. Walsh, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

[10]*California Education*, official publication of the California State Department of Education, May, 1964.